November 23, 2010

Al Seckel
Caprice Young
Thinking Skills Project

Dear Al and Caprice,

I think that your Thinking Skills Project is of fundamental importance to the competitiveness and civility of the United States, and the sustainability of humans on Earth. The fact is that most Americans, and most of their fellow citizens on Earth, have very weak thinking skills. Specifically, they are: often unaware of their own perceptual biases, frequently duped by propaganda, unable to examine arguments in depth, largely oblivious to the significance of the scientific method, and often disempowered with respect to systematic creativity and innovation. The skills that could repair these deficiencies are known, but they are not taught systematically, if at all.

There is a huge opportunity to educate people to think. Few people understand that thinking is indeed a skill set, and that even people with superior neural tissue may be poor thinkers. Last year at Singularity University at NASA Ames, we picked 80 students from 35 countries, out of an application pool of 1600. These students are extraordinary in many dimensions, but they often exhibit deficits in their thinking skills. For example, in the beginning of the program, they may adopt a particular belief system, and then collect evidence selectively to support it. There are many potential problems to solve, but few are as important as getting politicians, business leaders, and ordinary citizens around the world to think effectively.

I can offer two immediate resources to the project. First, I would be pleased to offer Singularity University's Graduate Studies Program GSP11 as a beta test site for the successive iterations of the project. Second, I would be pleased to serve in an informal advisory role to the technical project, on a pro bono basis. I have deep interest in the project, and relevant skills.

Sincerely,

Neil Jacobstein
President, Singularity University at NASA Ames
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